

PROTECTION PRIORITIES

Transylvania County is blessed with a large extent of publicly-owned land and intact forested landscape that continues relatively uninterrupted from the South Carolina state line to the Blue Ridge Parkway. Despite this great asset, many of the county's natural areas face natural and human-driven forces that threaten their ecological integrity. Rapid development of private lands for single family homes and, increasingly, for large mountain subdivisions is one of the primary factors undermining the county's ecological infrastructure. The number of new homes proposed to be built and acreage of land approved for development in the county has multiplied over the last several years. Unplanned and environmentally insensitive development fragments the forested landscape, degrades the quality of the county's natural areas, and compromises the ecological health of the rivers and streams. For instance, during the two-year county inventory period (2006-2007), a number of a large subdivisions were being developed in the county and have directly impacted natural areas or have disturbed areas adjacent to these significant sites.

Public lands are not immune from disturbance and land use change. Though many areas of the National Forests are well-suited for logging operations, timber management and associated road development also threaten areas of high quality mature forest and result in habitat fragmentation, degradation of intact natural communities, and introduction of invasive exotic plants along disturbance corridors. State-owned lands are also subject to some of the same pressures, as well as added threats in the form of facilities construction and expansion.

In light of the threats facing natural areas, assessment of conservation priorities in the county must take into account not just the ecological value of areas to be protected but also the relative threat posed to a site by potential development, logging, or other alteration of the natural quality of the land. Conservation planners ideally should factor in these threats when evaluating priority areas for protection and should aim towards preservation that promotes landscape connectivity and limits the potential for future fragmentation of Transylvania's sylvan character.

Priority areas for conservation include the Cedar Mountain area and the upper Little River watershed. The same qualities that make DuPont State Forest such a special place, i.e. unique geology, bogs and granitic outcrops, and a host of rare plant and animal species, also occur on private land throughout the area. In addition, the relatively intact private lands bordering DuPont State Forest form a large block of unfragmented forest that connects DuPont to the outskirts of Brevard and protected lands in South Carolina. Significant natural areas that form part of this corridor include sites along Reasonover Creek, Buckhorn Creek Slopes and Bogs, Rich Mountain/High Rocks, and Laurel Creek Headwaters.

The Little River floodplain historically supported a large complex of mountain bog wetlands, many of which have been drained for agriculture or development. Many remnant wetland areas persist along the river floodplain and, together with the bogs in DuPont, form one of the best wetland corridors in the North Carolina mountains. Privately owned sites in the Little River wetland corridor include the southern end of the Little River/Cedar Mountain Natural Area, Cedar Mountain Bog, Lake Derra Marsh, Little River Wetland Complex, Reasonover Creek Headwaters, and Reasonover Swamp Forest-Bog Complex.